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KT photo | Tim Bath

House of Burgess - Caveat emptor; seriously, be careful

Black Friday participation getting dangerous in spots

By Rob Burgess

Tribune columnist

Tomorrow is one my favorite holidays, Thanksgiving.

The day after tomorrow used to be one of my favorite holidays, Black Friday.

When I was growing up, my family always delighted in making fun of the lunatics who would get up before dawn to camp out in the freezing cold on the busiest shopping day of the year. We laughed and laughed as we would

drive by the bundled masses setting up their camping equipment in front of the big box stores around town.

Then, after I left for college, I became one of those people.

It was more of a game than anything. I would scan the ads and salivate over the deals. “Sure, I don’t need a paper shredder,” I would think to myself, “but with the mail-in rebate it’s practically free.” This jovial attitude persisted for several years, with more and more of my friends participating in a unified, coordinated effort. We strategically posted up at different stores, grabbing multiple items others in our group might want. I also understood the reasons that retailers put so much emphasis on this day. Tens of billions of dollars were on the line for them.

But in the years after I began engaging in Black Friday, I started noticing a general shift in attitude. I may be pining for a past that exists only in my imagination, but it certainly seemed more lighthearted in the beginning. As far as I can tell, the sea change took place at the same time the Great Recession flowered fully into a full-blown panic following the stock market crash of September 2008.

I had heard of violence and nastiness in years past, but it seemed more anecdotal. Most of the reports I heard consisted of relatively harmless

shoving and occasional rudeness. But with prices this low, what do you expect? Am I right?

But by 2008, a certain meanness permeated everything. Fellow shoppers used to laugh and joke with one another while waiting for the doors to open in the pre-dawn hours. The jokes weren't coming so easy anymore. The general attitude seemed to shift from: "Hey, this is fun!" To: "I NEED THIS!"

The 2008 Black Friday was tragically historic as the first death attached to the holiday was recorded. A 34-year-old Walmart employee in Valley Stream, N.Y., was fatally crushed as the doors opened.

"He was bum-rushed by 200 people," co-worker Jimmy Overby told the New York Daily News. "They took the doors off the hinges. He was trampled and killed in front of me."

Things only devolved from there.

In 2010, Lanessa L. Lattimore, 21, cut in front of a line of Black Friday shoppers waiting to enter a Madison, Wis., Toys "R" Us and threatened to shoot anyone who objected, according to CNN.

But I knew last year's Black Friday would be my last on the front lines when I heard the story of Elizabeth Macias, the pepper spray-packing Walmart shopper from Los Angeles.

"A woman trying to improve her chance to buy cheap electronics at a Walmart in a wealthy suburb spewed pepper spray on a crowd of shoppers and 20 people suffered minor injuries," reported the Associated Press. "The store had brought out a crate of discounted Xbox video game players, and a crowd had formed to wait for the unwrapping, when the woman began spraying people."

It started with shoving and trampling. Then came the threats. Now people are packing? I'm out. I've never been crushed, shot or pepper-sprayed before, but I've known people who have. Nothing they told me indicated either was worth a discounted gaming system - even an Xbox.

So this year I'm staying home. But I won't be making fun of anyone who decides to risk it. I'll be too busy worrying for their safety.

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